Murder Can Be Fun

No. 11 — $1.50

I ♥ DISASTERS

Havoc wrought by the explosion of a 2,000,000-gallon tank of molasses

The Great Boston Molasses Flood

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The immediately obvious thing about this issue is that it's late. Sorry. I was busy. Just rest assured that MCBF will never die... without refunds. There's all this neat stuff that I've just got to write about that no one else will publish.

And one of thosethings is disasters. I've always been a big fan of 'em, almost to the point of preferring them to a good murder. But that could just be because it's easier to write a good disaster book than a good crime book. Slanting the media, b'gosh.

My personal taste in disasters run towards those caused by human stupidity. This rules out most of the natural stuff -- volcanos, earthquakes, floods, etc. You can argue that people are stupid to live in places susceptible to 'em, but when you think about it, most places are. Here in the US, the East Coast has hurricanes, the West Coast has earthquakes, & the Midwest has tornados. You live in the valley, you watch out for floods. In the mountains, it's avalanches & forest fires, if not volcanoes. It's a rough world out there.

I do admit, though, some natural disasters are fun, like the Hawaiian tidal wave that mainly killed people who came to watch the tidal wave. But I'll take the man-made ones virtually every time. Virtually all could be avoided if people were perfect, but they're not. Someone's always to blame. It could be the pilot who zigged when he should have zagged, the building contractor cutting corners, or just the mob panicking & doing exactly the wrong thing. It's not fate, it's boo-boos. Whoops! Well, kiss that town goodbye....

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MCBF Update...

I trust you all caught the made-for-TV Karen Carpenter movie. While not scaling the cinematic heights of the Barbie doll version, nonetheless it was a satisfying piece of tv trash. Being authorized & produced under the supervision of the Carpenters, the family doesn't come off looking that creepy, & some of the more lurid details were obviously left out. But they don't come off looking like saints afflicted with a nutso daughter; in interests of accuracy, Richard even admitted to a Quallude problem. Of course, some obvious dramatic possibilities of this were ignored: we didn't see a half-comatose Richard mumbling to Karen, "Hey, why don't you go out & get yourself something to eat. I gotta get some sleep". But overall, a must for Carpenter fans of all stripes.

As usual, in the rush to get the 'zine out before my self-imposed deadline, a few juicy details got left out. First, the nuts. Like most people in the spotlight, the Carpenters had all sorts of crackpots after them. Karen, especially, had a problem with loonies showing up in Doney thinking that they were engaged. How do you think they handled this? Did they try to sympathize with the deluded masses? Of course not. Like normal people, they were both amused & annoyed by the nuts. Papa Carpenter would chase the more persistent suitors off, while Richard & Karen collected the wilder letters from "strangies" & reread them for kicks.

I also neglected to mention an amusing story involving Mama Carpenter. Seems K & R were a little brusque and rude with the usual post-gig autograph seeking hoard one night. Well, one of the slighted fans took their complaint to the top -- not the Carpenter's management, their PR firm, or even A & M records. They sent their letter straight to Downey, California. And, presumably after a bit of motherly toungue-lashing, they got their heart's desire -- a personal phonecall from Karen, apologizing. How nice.

Lots of people have been bombarding me with letters about SUPERSTAR, the K.C. movie w/Barbie dolls, about where & how to get a copy. Good question. It's not going to be at your neighborhood video store. I've heard rumours that it's facing legal action, not from Richard, not from A&M, but from Mattel. Steal songs, libel the living & the dead, but mess around with trademarked American icons... you're in trouble. Best bet is to wait for a midnight showing at the artiest theater in town or get it from under the counter at extremely hip video stores (you know, the kind that don't stock GHOSTBUSTERS II)

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The Great Boston Molasses Flood

For sheer strangeness, no disaster has ever topped Boston's Great Molasses Flood. Other disasters have run up higher body counts, caused more damage, inspired books & movies, & are remembered as Important Historical Events. The Molasses Flood was none of these: a mere 21 dead & $1 million damages, it's only been the subject of a handful of obscure magazine articles & newspaper clippings. Historically, it's peanuts, not even worthy of a footnote. But the idea & irony of 2½ million gallons of molasses raging through city streets, knocking over buildings & killing people in the middle of January ... unbeatable.

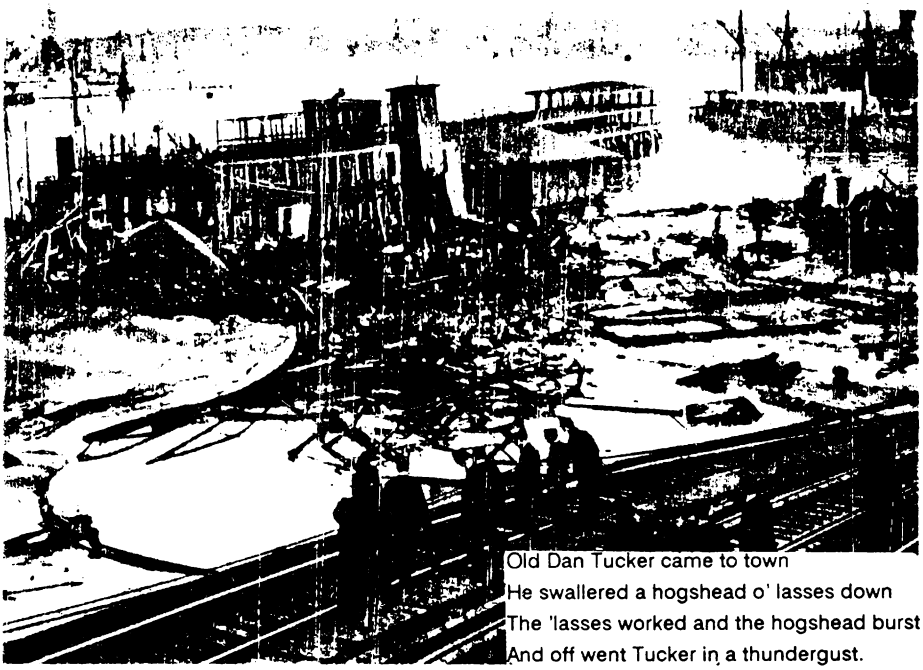
The date was January 15, 1919. At the intersection of Foster & Commercial streets in Boston's North End, the Purity Distilling Co. had a large, riveted steel storage tank, 50' high & 90' diameter. The tank stored shipments of raw molasses received from Cuba & the West Indies. The molasses would then be pumped from the tank into rail cars bound for a distillery in Cambridge which produced industrial-grade alcohol for the munitions industry. On that particular day, the tank was almost full, holding 2.3 million gallons of molasses weighing over 27 million pounds. Although cloudy, the weather was unseasonably warm for a Boston winter: 44°F with light winds.

At 12:41, it happened. Most people heard nothing; others remember a low rumbling or a sharp tearing sound. The two bottom rows of plates on the tank tore open, unleashing a 20' high wave of molasses moving some 35 mph onto the unsuspecting streets of the North End.

The conductor of the elevated train near the tank probably spotted it first. He rounded the curve & then "All I could see was molasses rushing toward me". He managed to stop the train in time.

Less lucky were those in the neighboring buildirgs. A local boxer, asleep in a 3rd floor bedroom "awoke in several feet of molasses", which drowned (suffocated?) his mother downstairs. The firemen in the nearby stationhouse were in a similar predicament. "We bumped our heads on the floor above trying to keep our noses & mouths above the fluid". One evidently didn't, & drowned.

When the molasses hit, it hit with power. The tank tore apart with such force that huge sections of the steel plates were flung up to 200'. Several chunks hit the el



Old Dan Tucker came to town
He swallered a hogshead o' lasses down
The 'lasses worked and the hogshead burst
And off went Tucker in a thundergust.

AFTER THE TANK OF MOLASSES BLEW UP.

track columns like shrapnel, shearing one & almost knocking down the others so that a few sections of the track fell to the ground.

The molasses itself was capable of knocking things about, too. Many wooden buildings were torn from their foundations, and bobbed like corks on the flood. 14 were completely destroyed. The flood even knocked one guy clean into the harbor, where he was rescued by a passing tug.

But he was one of the lucky ones. The worst thing about the flood was that it was molasses -- thick gooey sticky molasses that stuck to everything, and everyone, it touched, & would not let go. The Boston Post described it perfectly: "There was no escape from the wave. Human and animal alike could not flee. Snared in its flood was to be stifled. Once it smeared a head -- human or animal -- there was no coughing off the sticky mess. To attempt to wipe it with hands was to make it worse. Most of those who died, died of suffocation".

The molasses was like quicksand. Passers-by, wading in to help stuck people, were themselves trapped. Horses were hopeless, and had to be shot on the spot. People couldn't get out until mid-afternoon when the molasses finally settled, and when they got home, they had to cut their clothes off. According to the Boston Evening Transcript, "The entire neighborhood is a sea of molasses"

Another reporter described the aftermath as "the biggest mess since the Augean Stables". Cleaning up a

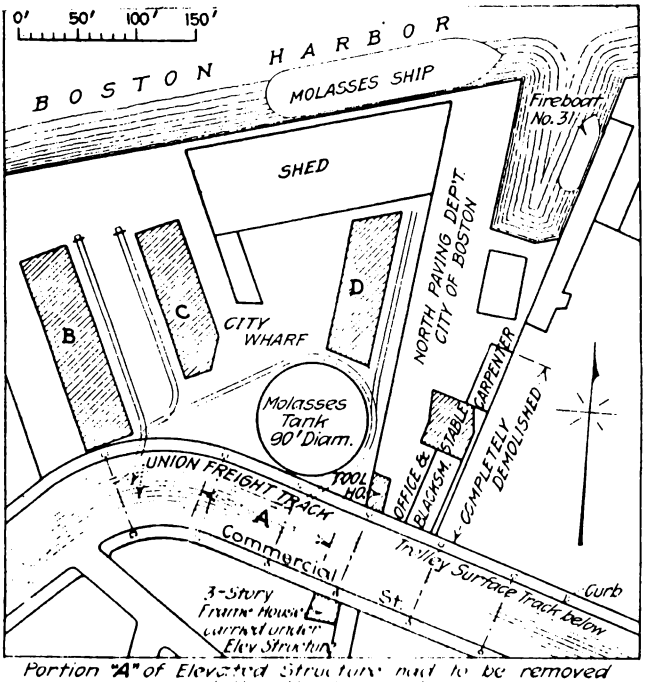


FIG. 1. LAYOUT OF DEVASTATED REGION NEAR MOLASSES TANK

spill of over 2 million gallons of molasses is not an easy job. It took a week just to recover the bodies of the 21 victims. Molasses had to be pumped out of every basement & washed into the harbor, a process that took several months & turned the harbor brown. The neighborhood reeked of molasses for weeks, and bystanders and spectators succeeded in tracking molasses throughout the greater Boston area. Sticky trolley seats were reported in Worcester, 45 miles away.

The press immediatly seized upon the idea of a "molasses explosion"; somehow, the molasses had fermented, possibly due to the unseasonable warmth, and the resulting alcohol explosively ignited by a careless cigarette. Even Scientific American speculated along these lines. A professor from Trinity College submitted the "Dan Tucker" stanza (from an old folk song) to the Literary Digest, claiming that it demonstrated that "the explosive potentialities of molasses were recognized a long, long time ago".

Of course, this isn't what happened. The tank had a nice big vent in the roof that would have dissapated the force of any explosion on top of the molasses. But consider a bomb deeply submerged in the molasses, preferably placed by anarchists that were rife among the Italian population of the North End -- now that has some possibilities.

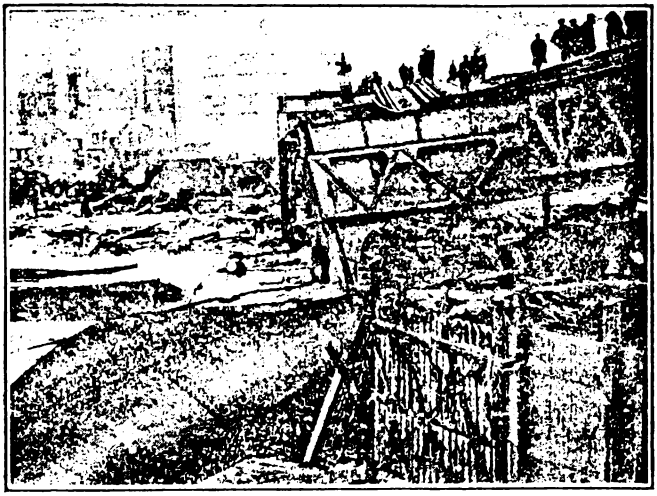


FIG. 5. STEEL SHELL AND ELEVATED RAILWAY WRECKED

This was Purity's main defense against the 119 lawsuits filed against it in the wake of the flood. It did sound better than their other theories, blaming vibrations from the el or progessive weakness resulting from some earlier freight car collisions. It was feasible -- a good heavy bomb with a waterproof fuse would do the job nicely. It sounded possible. Remember, this was Sacco & Vanzetti country, where bomb throwing anarchists lurked, in the popular imagination, on every streetcorner. Purity was having some labor problems at the time, and claimed that posters threatening company property had been posted around the North End in the weeks prior to the flood.

The Massachusets Fire Prevention Commisioner took a somewhat more orthodox position. In a report issued a few months after the flood, he blamed it on simple structural inadequacy of the tank.

Then, it was to the courts for a masterpiece of litigation: 4½ years and 40,000 transcript pages proving "they've got experts, we've got experts". For every MIT or Harvard professor Purity trotted out who swore high & low that it had to have been a bomb, the state produced a professor of their own saying that the tank simply broke because it wasn't strong enough. The judge (aka auditor) summed it up as: "I have listened to men upon the faith of whose judgement any capitalist might well rely in the expenditure of millions in structural steel swear that the secondary stresses in this kind of structure were negligible, & I have heard from equally authoratative sources that these same secondary stresses were the cause of the accident. Amid this swirl of polemical scientific waters it is not strange that the auditor has at times felt that the only rock to which he could safely cling was the obvious fact that at least ½ the scientists must be wrong".

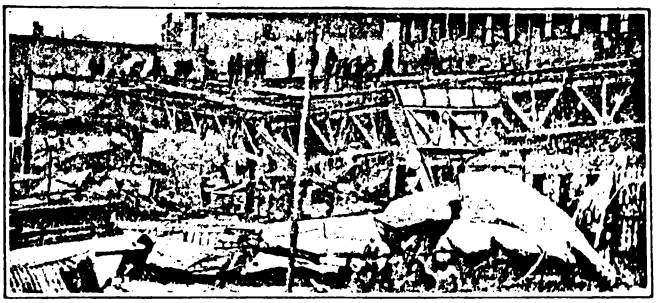


FIG. 6. STEEL PLATES WRAPPED AROUND COLUMN

The wrong half, of course, were the bomb theorists on the side of Purity. In building the tank, Purity had really screwed up. The company treasurer ordered a 2.3 million gallon tank with a factor of safety of 3 from the Hammond Iron Co., leaving the actual design up to them. No engineer at Purity ever checked the plans. The examiner at the Boston Building Department admitted that analyzing such a structure was beyond him, so he approved it because a civil engineer, presumably employed by Purity, had signed off on the plans. But this engineer had only done the foundation work; he hadn't even looked at the actual tank structure.

Using the unchecked plans, Hammond then proceeded to build a tank with plates thinner than called for. The end result was a tank with a safety factor well under the specified level. Even the defense experts agreed that they wouldn't have let that tank design by.

In the face of this, the judge was not impressed with Purity's other evidence of an anarchist bomb: a witness who claimed to have seen smoke (from a waterproof fuse, of course) rising from the tank shortly before the flood, and the results of bombs planted in scale models of the tank. He found the cause to be "high primary stresses, the low factor of safety, and the secondary stresses, in combination...". Purity reportedly wound up paying out some $1 million in damage claims.

Besides, if the anarchists had <u>really</u> wanted to put on a show, complete with fireworks & <u>real</u> property damage, they would have bombed the distillery over in Cambridge. Who ever heard of serious political radicals making a statement with molasses?

Go Berzerk!

The Port Chicago

Explosion

The Port Chicago Explosion was the worst disaster on the US homefront during World War II. In spite of the fact that it was the biggest man-made explosion in history, up to that point, it only was Big News for a few days. Today, it is all but forgotten by the mass public; only the locals who actually heard the bang remember. Yet, if it had happened during peacetime, we would have never heard the end of it. Like the Halifax explosion during World War I, it got lost in the shuffle. Wholesale deliberate slaughter is just so much more newsworthy.

For most of its history, Port Chicago was just another small railroad town along the Sacramento River, a few miles up from where it empties into San Francisco Bay. Population was never greater than a few thousand, most of whom commuted to jobs in the large, industrial river cities like Pittsburg and Antioch. There had been a small naval shipyard in town during World War I, but even this was dwarfed by the huge military installations in the nearby cities, like Vallejo's Mare Island Naval Shipyard and Pittsburg's Camp Stoneman.

After the start of World War II, it became apparent that there wasn't enough wharfage for loading munitions on the West Coast to supply the Pacific war. The Navy looked for a site with good road and rail access and a

decent deep water channel, yet reasonably isolated from large populations/industires. They found Port Chicago perfect.

By December 1942, the ammo depot at Port Chicago was operating, the first pier ever exclusively designed for munitions loading. The pier was later widened in 1944 to accomodate two ships.

Unfortunately, more care was taken in designing the facility than in picking who would load the ships, and how they would do it. The Navy decided civilian longshoreman were too expensive and paid too much attention to little things like union rules; in-house labor was much cheaper & docile.

And, the cheapest labor in the Navy at that time were black seaman. Like the rest of the armed forces, the Navy was strictly segregated, with blacks restricted to the fun stuff, like labor battalions. Port Chicago was just the place for 'em. Needless to say, they would be working under all-white officers, with virtually no chance of promotion. Just the thing for morale among the ranks.

Port Chicago was a hard-labor base with a single rule: Get The Ammo Out. Ship loading went on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at a break-neck pace. Unfortunately, no one knew quite how to load munitions & explosives. The Navy had no ordnance loading manual. Instead, the base relied on one put out by the ICC, which really only applied to handling small amounts in peacetime at a much more leisurely pace.

The black enlisted men, of course, had not had training in handling explosives. Many of the officers were similarily experienced. The local longshoremen offered to train the men, but the Navy never responded. In civilian life, a winch operator was never allowed to bad ordnance until he'd had years of experience and training with less sensitive loads; the Navy winchmen went at it with little or no training.

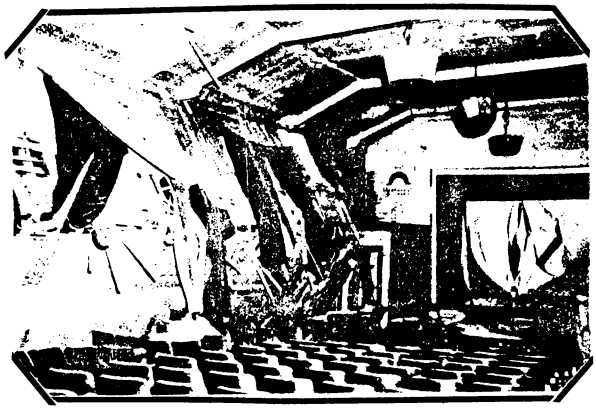
There were some safety rules, but they were never posted in the barracks. The base captain didn't think the enlisted men could understand them. As for the Coast Guard rep who was supposed to oversee the loading -- well, that would confuse the men, too.

The result? Lots of jokes about who would get out of the cargo hold first in case of trouble. With a loading goal of 10 tons per hatch per hour which was seldom met, there were enough bombs being rolled & dropped to give any newcomer the heebie-jeebies. There just wasn't the time to be that careful.

Something was bound to happen.

And it did, on July 17, 1944, at 10:18 PM PST.

The Liberty ship EA BRYAN had been loading since the 13th. By the evening of the 17th, her 5 cargo holds (each the depth of a 4-story building) were a little over half full with 4600 tons of ordnance, including depth charges, 5000 # bombs, and 650# incendiary bombs. These were considered especially dangerous; unlike most bombs, they were loaded with the fuses & detonators



Sensurround amok inside the Port Chicago Theater

intact -- very carefully. On the other side of the pier was the QUINALT VICTORY, which had docked at 6:00 and was being rigged for loading. The pier was, as usual, jammed with men, locomotives, boxcars, and 430 tons of bombs.

And then, at 10:18, there was a small explosion, followed by a big explosion about 7 seconds later -- the biggest manmade explosion in history, up to that point.

It was like the worlds biggest fireworks show. A huge column of fire & smoke rose above the depot. The glare of the explosion was seen in San Francisco, 35 miles away. Windows were broken as far away as Berkeley. The shock was felt, and the explosion heard, throughout the entire Bay Area, with most people mistaking it for an earthquake. Seismographs as far away as Nevada recorded the shock as equivalent to a 3.4 Richter magnitude earthquake.

The town hardest hit was, of course, Port Chicago itself. The locals at the movie theatre late show were watching the bombing sequence in "China" when the blast hit; this early experiment in sensurround buckled the theatre wall and damaged virtually every other building in Port Chicago. No one in town ever thought it was just another earthquake, especially after the sky started raining unexploded bombs from the blast. No one was killed, but 119 locals were injured.

As for the depot... well, there wasn't much depot left. The 1200-foot long pier was gone, reduced to matchsticks and kindling wood. No piece was ever found of the 12-ton locomotive on the pier. Very little wreckage of the loaded ammo ship EA BRYAN was ever found; it, too, had been blown to bits. Faring slightly better was the empty QUINALT VICTORY. It had been blown out of the water, spun 180°, & dropped right back in to sink, completely wrecked. A nearby Coast Guard fire barge was blown 200 yards up the river and sunk. Buildings on the base itself, about a mile away from the erstwhile pier, were heavily damaged. And, needless to say, all 320 men who had the misfortune to be working on the pier at the time, were killed. Only 51 bodies or identifiable parts

were ever recovered.

No one at the base itself was killed, although 390 were injured. After the initial shock, things were relatively calm. The men reacted as they'd been trained to react -- applying first aid, fighting fires, and so forth. One group even managed to put out a boxcar fire which, if left unchecked, would have probably set off a whole string of explosions.

Cleanup the next day was not much fun. One sailor recalled, "Man, it was awful; that was a sight. You'd see a shoe with a foot in it and then you would remember how you'd joked about who was gonna be the first one out of the hold". Of the 320 dead, 202 were black enlisted men. When combined with the injured back at the base, the explosion was responsible for 1/5 of all black casualties in WWII.

After the explosion, all the white officers were granted 30-days survivor's leaves, while the remaining black enlisted men were transferred to Mare Island Shipyard and Camp Stoneman & assigned to general barracks duties. Later, they were all bussed to Mare Island for what they suspected was more ammo loading. On Aug 9, they were marched out of the barracks. When they were commanded to turn towards the docks, the company spontaneously halted. Thus began the great Port Chicago Mutiny, which is much better remembered today than the actual explosion that inspired it.

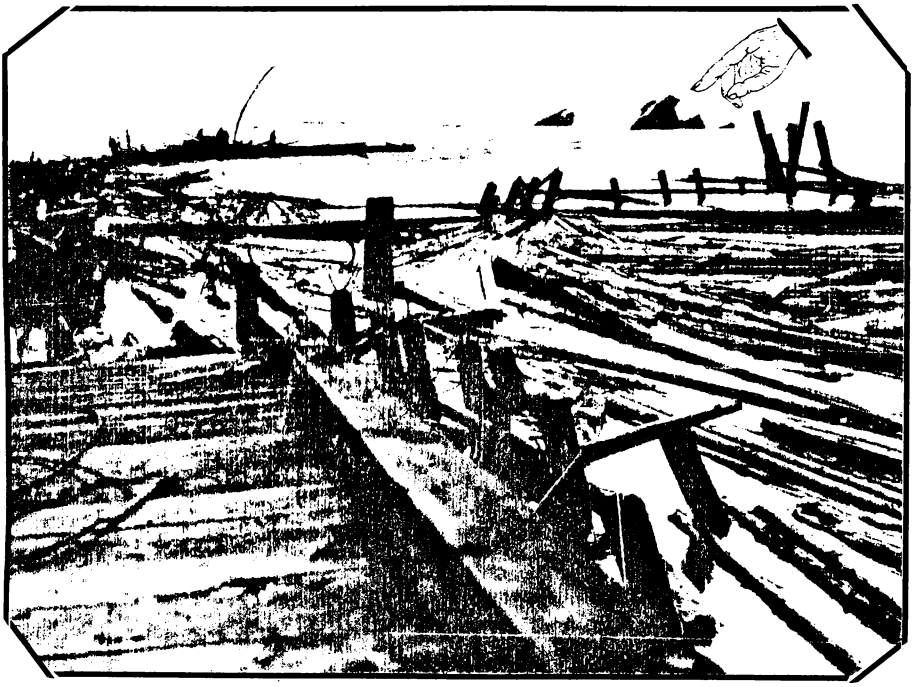
258 of the men were sent to a prison barge. To keep the ammo moving, the Navy finally brought in civilian contract stevedores. A few days later, the men were taken off the barge & offered a choice -- ammo loading or ???. 208 of the men were sufficiently intimidated to agree that they would go back to work on the docks. However, they weren't that lucky. All 208 went right back into the brig to await court martial. Later, the Navy found all guilty of disobeying orders, fined them 3 months pay, and gave them bad conduct discharges.

The remaining 50 who continued to refuse weren't all deliberately refusing to follow orders. Some weren't supposed to be loading at all -- one had a broken wrist, another was too small for the job, and so on. But no matter. All were treated identically, and the charge was mutiny.

A strange charge, to say the least. Generally, a mutiny requires a conspiracy or an act of attempted rebellion. The 50 weren't interested in revolt -- they just didn't want to load those damn bombs. As one put it, "I got a chance over there with the enemy -- but I ain't got no chance in that hold".

All were convicted, and sentenced to 8 - 15 years in federal prison. However, by early 1946, with the war over, 49 were released (1 had committed a crime in prison). After spending a few months overseas on active duty, all were honorably discharged, albeit with a mutiny conviction on their records.

As for the actual explosion, the exact cause was never identified, and no one ever got the blame. A Court of Inquiry identified the following possible causes, in order of decreasing probability: 1) A super-



Wreckage of pier. Finger points to the stern of the QUINALT VICTORY.

sensitive element detonating during normal handling; 2) detonation due to rough handling; 3) failure of loading boom; 4) collision of locomotive with boxcar; 5) incident involving the mooring lines of the QUINALT VICTORY; and, 6) sabotage. The court found no evidence of sabotage, but concluded "it cannot be ignored as a possibility".

Not only was the town of Port Chicago physically torn apart, with all its businesses & 90% of its homes damaged, but alsodivided over what to do about it. One faction had had enough; they wanted to sell out to the Navy lock, stock and barrel. The other faction scented money. They wanted compensation -- full compensation for all damages, including mental & physical suffering.

The town wound up with compensation. Unfortunately, they hadn't reckoned with the pig-headedness of Mississippi Representative John Rankin, and the stinginess of Congress in general. Congress was prepared to pay claims of up to $5000 per household, until someone pointed out to Rankin that the primarily black families of the dead seamen could also collect. He then successfully lobbied to reduce the compensation limit to $3000. This didn't even cover the cost of repairs for many Port Chicagoans.

The town of Port Chicago does not exist today. The Navy eventually expanded the facility, renamed it the Concord Naval Weapons Station, and bought out & rased the town in 1968. You can still see the street

Clean up at Port Chicago grocery store

grid from the fence, but all other traces of the town are gone. The name only surfaces occaisonally these days -- a site of the Vietnam-era "Port Chicago Vigil" protest, the place were anti-contra protestor Brian Wilson lost his legs in 1987, and the scene of a moderately important incident in military race relations. Yet, the explosion is all but forgotten -- the biggest non-nuclear explosion in US history.

-but, Was It Atomic?

When I first started working on this article, I thought it would be pretty simple & basic -- an afternoon or two digging through contemporary newspapers, a quick spin through the RGPL. Then, I discovered an article by sociologist Robert Allen in the Spring '82 issue of THE BLACK SCHOLAR on the mutiny, but with plenty of details on the explosion. And then synchronicity struck & Allen came out with a full length book, THE PORT CHICAGO MUTINY (Warner, 1989), a great book from which I confess I got virtually all of the above info. (Hey, if I could get a Guggenheim too, I'm sure I could dig up something too).

But also in that 1982 issue of THE BLACK SCHOLAR was another Port Chicago article: "The Last Wave From Port Chicago" by Peter Vogel, in which he presents the theory that the Port Chicago explosion was actually atomic, probably a top secret test to determine the effect of an A-bomb delivered by ship.

Vogel first got started on this when, in the best conspiracy theory tradition, he found a mysterious document in the botton of a box of photo supplies he'd purchased at a church rummage sale. Entitled "History of the 10,000 Ton Gadget", it details the effect of a nuclear explosion & contains the phrase "Ball of fire mushroom out at 18000'in typical Port Chicago fashion".

Unlike most documents discovered like this, this one is almost certainly genuine. Vogel uses this as

a jumping off point in a chain of logic that proves that the blast was nuclear.

His chain of evidence goes: 1) Did the US have the capability & materials to make a A-bomb in 1944? Yes. 2) Had the bomb been designed? Yes. So far, so good. But, around his 3rd point, things get shaky. 3) Any evidence that the explosion was indeed nuclear? Maybe, maybe not.

He, of course, claims that it is, citing eyewitness testimony of a pilot who saw the blast: a bright white flash & a "Wilson Condensation Cloud". As further corraboration, manifests for the contents of 2 boxcars on the pier were destroyed, and Vogel found a few hundred pages of records on the explosion in Los Alamos's files. "If the Port Chicago explosion was an ordinary conventional explosion, why would such extensive documentation & analysis of it be found in an atomic weapons lab?"

Well, maybe because it was a big conventional explosion. Why wouldn't the developers of a bigger, better bomb be interested in the biggest explosions around?

But the "nuclear effects" theory is Vogel's major shaky ground. Vogel's a newspaper reporter, not a scientist. He claims the "Wilson Condensation Cloud" & the white flash could only be caused by a nuclear blast. Assuming that's what the pilot saw, Vogel's quoted weapons textbook attributes the cloud to condensation of water vapor from sudden air pressure changes due to the passage of a shockwave. Wouldn't a big conventional explosion produce its own shockwave?

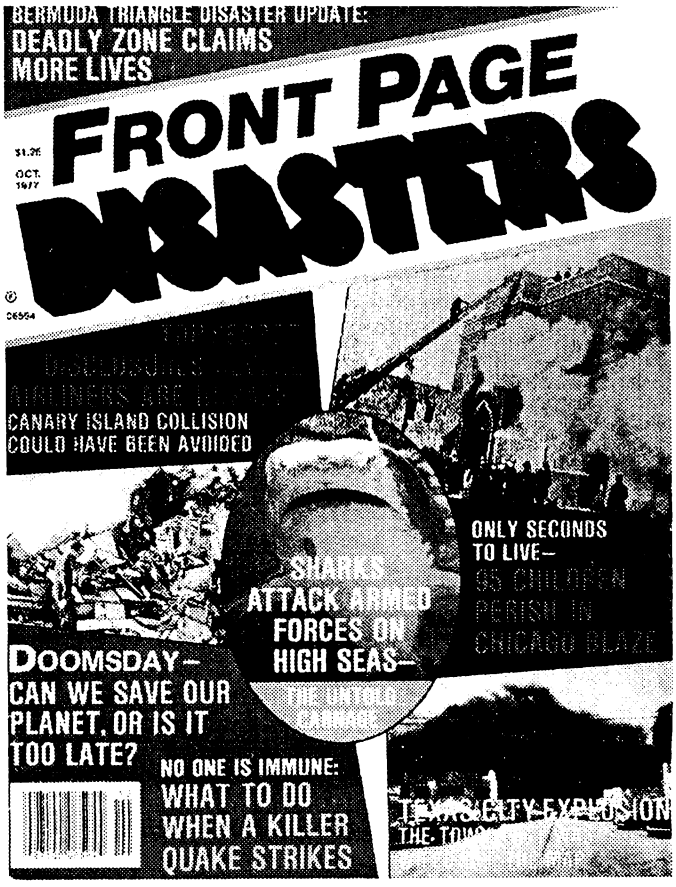
And he produces no other evidence -- nothing about abnormal amounts of radiation, radiation sickness, fallout, flash-induced blindness -- nothing. He makes a quick reference the the high cancer rate in the region (due, if anything, to smoking & industrial pollution, according to conventional authorities), but hey, what about trying to measure some of that nasty fallout?

And then, there's the logic of it. Would the Navy willingly blow up such an important port for the sake of an experiment? And, if they did, wouldn't the place be crawling with scientists measuring everything they could think of & generating thousands of pages of reports? Naaaah!

In THE PORT CHICAGO MUTINY (book), Allen states that "Vogel himself abandoned the theory when no hard evidence could be found to support it". It was a good theory, too, with some disturbingly convincing circumstantial evidence. But the real hard facts just don't exist. One swallow does not a summer make.

Nearly All Pedestrian Accidents Involve Injuries

We're Not the



Just in case anyone accuses you of being part of some deviant weirdo minority for reading a 'zine about disasters, here's your defense. FRONT PAGE DISASTERS was published briefly in the late '70s by Cousins Publishing, a New York outfit. Format is a lot like the true detective rags -- a slick cover on pulp innards. You can judge the contents from the covers, if you look at them with a sufficiently jaundiced eyes. Stuff like "Bermuda Triangle Disaster Update" and "Psychic Animals Predict Earthquakes"are drivel, and most of the other articles

Only Ones!

on real disasters are overhyped. But they are ok. Most seem to be "It Happened To Me" first person stuff, but they are good disasters, & there's nothing wrong with a little sensationalism. Just don't use them as primary source material. That's entertainment.

Although the masthead claims FPD to be bi-monthly, I suspect these are the only 2 issues (Vol I, #1 & Vol II, #1). If there were others, there weren't many, & I'd love to get 'em. Some magazines are just too good to live.

"CLASSIC" AMERICAN DISASTERS

Over the years, the US has been hit by so many disasters, it's impossible to pick a 10-best list. So, instead of arbitrarily selecting my favorites, I let science (well, psuedo-science) do the work. I dug out 9 disaster books that only cover (or claim to) the best, the brightest, the most interesting... you get the picture. Then, I counted which disaster appeared in how many books. Not a rigorous statistical study, but at least it'll give you an idea of the most popular disasters.

The choices were far from unanimous. Even with only 9 books, the total number of disasters discussed was over 80 (although this includes non-US disasters as well). A boredom factor seemed to be at work. Certain old, but well-loved & well known, did no better than honorable mention (ie, Chicago Fire, Johnstown Flood, SF Earthquake). And, of course, since many of the books in the "sample" are 10 or 20 years old, few recent incidents did well. Clever readers will also notice that the bulk of the disasters happened in New York City or environs. If it happens in your town, it's local news. In New York, it's national news.

So, here they are. Numbers in parenthesis represent number of books discussing the disaster.

(6) HINDENBURG EXPLOSION/FIRE Lakehurst, NJ 5/6/37
Score: 36 dead
Story: The largest (and, as it turned out, the last) dirigible ever built mysteriously ignited shortly before mooring after completing a transatlantic flight. Being filled with hydrogen instead of helium, fire was extremely photogenic. Cause of fire was never determined, and has been attributed to static electricity by conventional types & anti-Nazi sabateurs by conspiracy buffs.
Fun Facts: 62 people survived; explosion could have been avoided by using helium, as all US airships did; unfortunately, the US had the monopoly & wasn't about to supply it to Germany.

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(5) COCONUT GROVE NIGHTCLUB FIRE Boston, 11/28/42
Score: 491 dead
Story: A hoplessly over-crowded nightclub, extremely flammable decorations, poorly marked exits. Add a spark & you've got a real fire. Fire believed to have started in the downstairs Melody Lounge from a spark from changing a lightbulb, and spread quickly through the club. Things were especially bloody around the front door, a revolving door which was promptly jammed by the panic-stricken mob.
Fun Facts: Club employee allegedly yelled, "No one gets out until they pay their check". Club owner sentenced to 15 years, & building contractor to 2.

(5) TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE New York City, 3/25/11
Score: 145 dead
Story: Occupying the 8th, 9th, & 10th floors of the Asch Building (next to NYU), the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. was jammed with girls, rags, and sewing machines (ie, a "sweatshop"). There was only one fire escape, and at least one of the exit doors was locked to prevent pilferage. When the fire broke out, the exits were quickly jammed, the fire escape collapsed, and the fire department ladders could only reach the 6th floor. The girls began jumping, but the height was so great they tore through the fire nets and, in a few cases, crashed through the sidewalk into the basement.
Fun Facts: No one ever went to jail for this one.

(5) GENERAL SLOCUM FIRE New York City, 6/15/04
Score: 1031 dead
Story: The General Slocum, a side-wheeler excursion steamer, caught fire in the middle of the East River, off 83rd Street. Instead of putting ashore, the captain steamed ahead with the stupid idea of grounding the ship on North Brother Island. He missed, & wound up on the rocks 250' offshore. Most of the passengers couldn't swim, the lifejackets were filled with sawdust, & the lifeboats wired on. Less than 400 survived.
Fun Facts: Captain Van Schaik survived, & got 10 years.

(5) GALVESTON FLOOD Galveston, TX 9/8/00
Score: at least 6000 dead
Story: At the turn of the century, the city of Galveston occupied a mile-wide sandbar jutting into the Gulf of Mexico, only 9' above sea level. A hurricane quickly made quickly made Galveston aa part of the Gulf, completely submerging most of the city & destroying most buildings & 1/7th of the population. City was later rebuilt, but this time 17' above sea level with a sea wall. The worst single disaster in US history.
Fun Facts: Another hurricane hit in 1915, but only got 275 residents thanks to the sea wall & stuff.

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(5) NEW LONDON SCHOOL EXPLOSION New London, TX 3/18/37

Score: 413 dead, including 91 of the 92 member graduating class

Story: To save money, the school was heated with waste gas from the neighboring oil refinery. The school radiators weren't adjusted properly to burn this type of gas, so the unburnt, odorless gas gradually accumulated to an explosive level, requiring only a single spark (or an illicit student cigarette!) to blow. Only the high school kids got it; the younger grades had been dismissed 10 minutes earlier.

Fun Facts: Written on a chalk board found in the rubble: "Oil & gas are East Texas' greatest mineral blessings. Without them, this school would not be here & none of us would be learning our lessons".

(4) EMPIRE STATE BUILDING PLANE COLLISION New York City, 7/28/45

Score: 13 dead

Story: On a foggy day, a B-25 bomber bound for Newark, NJ crashed into the Empire State Building between the 78th & 79th floors. Wreckage was strewn over a 5-block area, & several neighboring buildings (as well as the ESB itself) were set afire. Only the fact that it was Saturday morning kept the toll down.

Fun Facts: Evidentally, the pilot mistook the East River for the Hudson River & Manhattan for New Jersey. How insulting.

(4) TEXAS CITY,EXPLOSION Texas City, TX 4/16/47

Score: at least 468 dead

Story: A freighter loaded with nitrate fertilizer caught fire, probably from a longshoreman's cigarette. After a few hours of half-assed firefighting the ship blew. This caused the nearby Monsanto styrene plant to explode a few minutes later. Several hours later, another nitrate ship in the harbor also exploded. Needless to say, the town was heavily damaged by the blast & the resulting fires.

Fun Facts: Local old timers got a bit of nostalgia when one of the local refineries was rocked by a series of 12 explosions in 1978. Only 6 were killed, all refinery employees.

(4) IROQUIS THEATRE FIRE Chicago, IL 12/30/03

Score: 602 dead

Story: A fire broke out on stage during the 2nd act of an Eddie Foy musical. In spite of Foy's efforts to calm the crowd, they stampeded to the exits, many of which were frozen shut or locked. Although the backstage area was gutted, damage to the main theatre was minimal. The fire was out 15 minutes after it started.

Fun Facts: The worst theatre fire in US history.

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(4) LONG ISLAND TRAIN COLLISON Richmond Hill, NY 11/22/50
Score: 77 dead
Story: The brakes of the 6:09 commuter train locked 2 miles before reaching the Jamaica Station. Although the crew promptly set up flares & signal tower flashed warnings, the 6:13 train missed them & plowed into the rear of the 6:09.
Fun Facts: 'Twas the night before Thanksgiving...

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HONORABLE MENTION -- Each appears in 3 books

NEW YORK CITY MID-AIR COLLISION 12/16/60 -- Two jets collide over Staten Island; 133 killed, including 5 on ground
SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE 4/18/06 -- about 800 dead
CHERRY, IL MINE FIRE 11/13/09 -- Coal mine fire, 259 d.
ALASKA EARTHQUAKE 5/27/64 -- 131 dead
GREAT CHICAGO FIRE 10/8/1871 -- about 450 dead
JOHNSTOWN FLOOD -- 5/31/1889 -- Flood caused by collapse of earthen damn; 2209 dead
HINCKLEY, MN FIRE 9/1/1894 -- Forest fire destroys 12 towns, including Hinckley; 418 dead
SS EASTLAND Chicago, 6/24/15 -- Overloaded excursion steamer capsizes at dock; 812 dead
OHIO STATE PRISON FIRE 4/21/30 -- fire at overcrowded prison; 320 dead

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For the record, the 9 books "polled" were:
THE PEOPLE'S ALMANAC
DISASTER by Donald Sobol
THE BOOK OF DISASTERS by Jane Ferguson
CRIMES & CHAOS by Avram Davidson
CATASTROPHE, CALAMITY, & CATACLYSM by James Cornell
DISASTER: MAJOR AMERICAN CATASTROPHES by A.A. Hoehling
10 DISASTERS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD (magazine)
DISASTER, DISASTER, DISASTER ed. by Doug Newton
DISASTERS THAT MADE HISTORY by Webb Garrison

The quality of these range from excellent to awful. A few are reviewed later this issue. Purchase the rest with care. One interesting note: a lot of these are aimed at kids. Is there yet hope for American youth?

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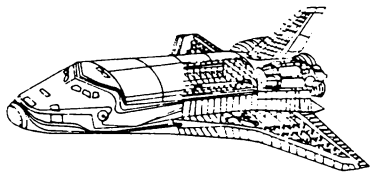


Obscure

DISASTERS

Some disasters just never get the respect they deserve. Some simply don't run up the big body counts & damage bills. Others are simply the victims of bad timing and/or location. The classic example of this is the Peshtigo, WI 1871 Forest Fire. The worst fire in US history, it wiped out several towns & killed at least 1500 people. Reason no one's ever heard of it is that it happened in the 'sticks on the same day as the Great Chicago Fire. Talk about bad luck.

But, anyway, here's a few other disasters that I think deserve rescue from obscurity, relative or otherwise.

HARTFORD CIRCUS FIRE, 7/9/44

Score: 168 dead

I don't know how this missed at least being honorable mention... The Ringling Bros. etc.'s Big Top caught fire during a matinee (trivia buffs: during a perfomance by the Flying Wallendas). The canvas wasn't fireproof, it was a hot day, & it burned like hell. All the performers & staff got out; part of the audience paniced & wasn't so lucky. Five top level managers got 1-year sentences, & the whole thing inspired the industry switch to arenas. For pathos: Victim #1565 was a 5-year old girl with an undamaged face. In spite of papers from coast to coast, no one ever claimed her body.

NASHVILLE TRAIN WRECK 7/9/18

Score: 101 dead, 171 injured

Worst ever US train wreck. A local train ran a stop signal 5 miles outside of town & wound up on the same track as the express train, but heading the opposite direction. The resulting crash demolished both locomotives, 3 baggage cars & 6 passenger cars. Information on this crash is extremely sketchy; the newspapers were preoccupied with the war. The dead appear to have mainly been black workers en route to the local defense camp, with a few soldier thrown in for good measure.

COLLINGWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FIRE Cleveland, 3/8/08
Score: 175 dead -- 173 students, 2 teachers

This is the reason you had so many fire drills in school. The kids had 'em at Collingwood, but only a few. When the fire started, they went into their standard fire drill march down the stairs out the front door. Unfortunately, that's where the fire was. The kids panicked. A few mindlessly kept on heading out the front door -- & survived; the fire wasn't that bad there. Most headed towards the back door, which was either locked or jammed (same results). A bunch also headed back upstairs to use the fireescape. They ran headlong into kids coming down from the top floor, turning the stairway into a tangled mess. Only 80 people escaped the school uninjured.

NEW MADRID EARTHQUAKE New Madrid, MO 12/6/1811 - 2/7/12
Score: Unknown, but probably few deaths

Us Californians get a lot of guff from the rest of the country about out earthquakes. Little do they realize, though, that the longest series & the most severe quakes in US history happened in the safe, dull, & boring Midwest. Beginning in December, the then sparsely populated area started to get rearranged. The first quake was felt over 2/3 of the US & stopped clocks in Boston. Over the next few months, praries turned to swamps, boats capsized, rivers changed their course, and new lakes were created (Reelfoot in TN). Eyewitness accounts were understandably crazed, but they claim that both the Mississippi & Ohio Rivers flowed backwards briefly. After it was all over, the area became the first disaster area to receive aid from the government.

GRAND CANYON PLANE COLLISION 6/30/56
Score: 128 dead

An air traffic controller goof sent a Constellation & DC7 jets onto a collision course in the clouds over the Grand Canyon. Pilots were preparing to bank to give passengers a good phto opprotunity when it occured. Worst air accident in US history to that time.

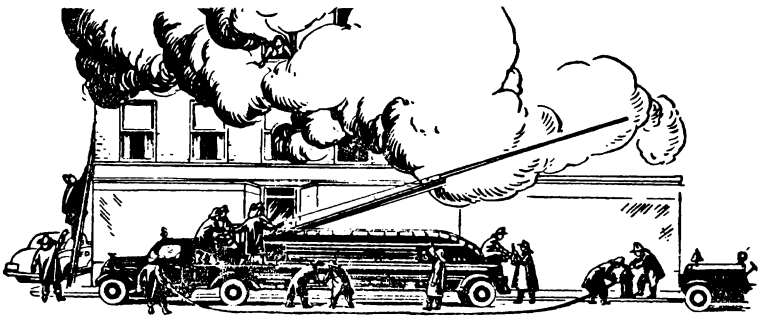


FIG. 12. Fire! Sirens scream as motorized fire apparatus speeds to the scene, arriving during the first few vital minutes after the alarm.

BIG Disaster Books

THE GREAT INTERNATIONAL DISASTER BOOK by James Cornell (2nd ed. -- Pocket Books, 1979. 412 pp)
DARKEST HOURS by Jay Robert Nash (Wallaby/Pocket, 1977. 792 pgs.)

It's hard to keep all the good disasters straight. Not only are there at least a dozen good ones every year in the US alone, there's an entire 2000-year history of 'em waiting to be dug out of the history books & appreciated. However, most disaster books are limited in scope, only covering a dozen or so "major" catastrophes. The standard reference books aren't much better -- a couple articles on the big ones, a few top 10 lists, and a couple pictures. Where to turn for complete, one stop research?

To these books, of course. These are the only tow I know of that attempt to provide comprehensive coverage of all the great & near-great disasters. And both, for the most part, live up to their billing. Serious nit-pickers, I'm sure, can find a few disasters that slipped through the cracks. But, odds are, those same nit-pickers would find dozens of disasters they've never heard of in these books. They're a must for any good disaster library.

Of the two, Nash's DARKEST HOURS is the most widely available. It's in every library I've ever checked, & i see it in used bookstores all the time. Unfortunately, of the two, it's the lesser. Things always work out that way.

The book is divided into 2 sections. The first, the "General Narrative" is like an encyclopedia -- an alphabetical listing of several hundred great & not-so-great disasters, with entries ranging in length from a paragraph or two to several pages. The appendix has chronological lists of several thousand disasters, sorted by type (air crashes, fire, etc.) with a line or two of description of each (to say nothing of death tolls!)

You can't argue with the appendix. It's the most complete, if sketchily described, list of disasters I've ever seen. But the main "encyclopedia" part leaves much to be desired. The entries are loaded with information & lavishly illustrated with photos. But, too much of the "information" is just journalistic human interest stuff. Nash is more interested in embellishing the facts with details that, admittedly, make for fun reading, but lousy reference. I've also found a couple outright factual mistakes. It still is a good book to have, but more for browsing than footnoting.

THE GREAT INTERNATIONAL DISASTER BOOK is definitely the better reference book. Don't think that this makes it boring; there's enough fun facts to make for great browsing in this one. They just aren't as many, so they don't get in the way of the basic facts. Whenever someone mentions a disaster, this is where I turn first.

Like Nash, the book is broken into 2 sections. But Cornell's first section is more a general essay on the history, future, & theory of disasters, containing lots of not otherwise readily obtainable info. Perhaps an introduction to Disaster Appreciation? The 2nd section, of course, gets down to the nitty gritty: the disasters themselves. The section is subdivided according to type of disaster (Natural vs. Manmade) &then even further subdivided (fires, avalanches, etc.) & further (single-building fires, maritime disasters, car-crashes!, etc.). Each section is prefaced by a page or two of general information on the type of disaster. This is followed by a top ten list and a chronological list of other famous examples of the type. Each entry is anywhere from a few lines to a few pages, depending on aesthetic appeal & historical importance. And, to make things easy, there's a complete index in the back.

The usefullness of this to a serious buff is obvious. Let's say you have a deep, sincere appreciation for urban conflagrations, especially in the New York City area. None make the top 10, but there was one in 1776 that destroyed 1/4 of the city & one in 1835 that wiped out the financial district. The top fire of all times wiped out Tokyo & Yokahama in 1923, while the SF Earthquake fire was the worst in US history, ranked 7th. The Great Chicago Fire did no better than 8th.

A 3rd edition of the book has been published, but is real tough to find even though it is supposedly still in print. If you have to do with just one "big" disaster books, this should be it. But, if not, either the first or 2nd editions will do. And Nash's book, though not as good, shouldn't be passed up.

AL HOFF,
Girl Reporter

DEATHSCAM
or,
The Tragic Non-Events in US History & the Museum Dedicated To Them

Tragedy is dear to the American psyche -- crime, death, destruction, individuals battered about in the seas of modern turmoil, lives horribly altered, hundreds dead. (YOU are reading this magazine, aren't you?) This is the stuff our media is made of. We owe them much for unabashedly raising personal tragedy from the beauty shop/street confer level to the heights of national consciousness -- thus making tragedy a component of all lives, a page of history. Having established this social institution of pathos, this national need for the cultural consumption of tragedy, two questions spring to mind: "Why isn't there a museum to hold the national treasures of our collective tragedy?" and "Since such a museum already exists, why has it been overlooked?"

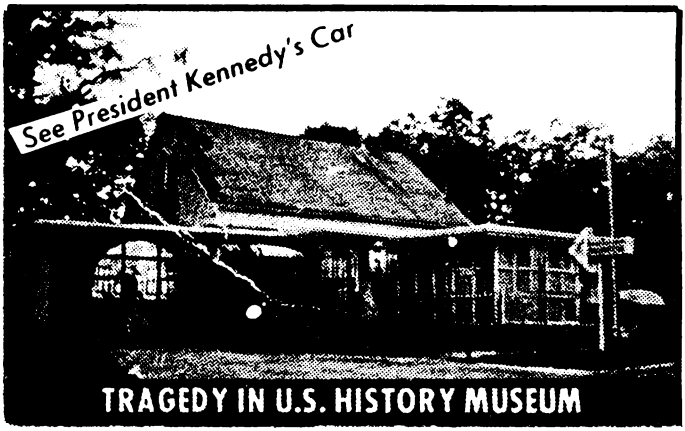
It does exist, nestled in a quaint, leafy corner of St. Augustine, FL, adjacent to Ponce DeLeon's Fountain of youth (which, coinicidentally, preys on the Tragedy-Avoiders. The loss of youth to some gals is a fate worse than a fiery death). There, in the sun-kissed haven of good sea air and eternity, sits the aptly named TRAGEDY IN US HISTORY MUSEUM.

The sign outside heralds the treasure to be found within (see inset). You are intrigued. Note the many cars listed. It is a given that Automobiles and American Tragedy go hand in hand. Pay $3.50 and enter the inner sanctum of death and disaster, You, a connoisseur of tragedy, are alone in the Tragedy in US History Museum. Noticeably alone... Why?

The word "museum" conjures up images of stately Greco-Roman marble piles, with parquet floors, 20-foot ceiling, and scientific lighting. There is a certain solemnity to such institutes of display and learning. Conversely, Tragedy in US History Museum is the ground floor of someone's house -- you basic family unit. It is dark, and smells musty. There is not a reverent hush, but rather an embarrassing silence. So much for atmosphere. But, you haven't come here for Smithsonian ambience -- you're here for the exhibits, the gore.

Let's examine the exhibits.. The living room contains 3 automobiles. What feat of Houdini could have topped getting 3 large automobiles into the interior of a family home? A large, black limo catches your eye -- President Kennedy's limo, Dallas, gunshots, flying brains, the blood on Jackie's stocking. You move forward eagerly. As you read the display sign, you realize that actually this is the limo Kennedy used in Washington, DC. It is NOT the Death-Limo. No bullet holes here. You move on.

The next car is a late 1950's sedan. This is Lee Harvey Oswald's car. The car he drove to the Texas Book Depository??... Nooo, carefully notarized documents



7 Williams Street
St. Augustine, Florida

THIS MUSEUM IS HISTORICAL AND EDUCATIONAL

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framed on the wall testify that this was indeed Oswald's care, but that he sold it just prior to committing the Crime of the Century. Another document speculates that he may have used this car to purchase the murder weapon.

There is a pattern developing. Suspiciously, you peruse the 3rd automobile, the ambulance. Fantastic! History, blood and death at last. This ambulance carried the stricken Oswald after he was shot by Jack Ruby. No signs of trauma to the car, but you still gaze reverently into the rear. More notarized documents accompany this exhibit. They must have spent a fortune on some notary public.

The walls of the AutoRoom are covered with newspaper clippings relating to JFK's career and assassination. (In case you didn't know??) Though framed, these clipping are yellowing with age. Some are torn, even to the point of obliteration.

The next room contains the Oswald Bedroom Exhibit, behind a rope. ("Kids! Don't play on Oswald's bed!") Oswald was evidently a man of simple tastes -- a double bed, a chest, a desk, & a chair. No embellishments. Real Rent-a-Room decor. A notarized statement from his landlady suggests that Oswald hay have worked out "the details" of the assassination at the very spot.

The gun! The sign outside said "See the gun that shot Kennedy!". Didn't it? No, that sign actually read "Duplicate Italian Carcano rifle, said to be the murder weapon". Duplicate. And there it is. Ersatz tragedy. Big deal.

On to the next "room: which is actually a pantry, lined with more notarized affidavits and yellowed newspaper clippings. These concern some pretty obscure tragic events -- a train wreck in the Florida Keys in 1897. Many killed. A small glass box contains the train whistle. An ironic reflection on what effect it had. Photos of race riots in St. Augustine in the '60s, and a collection of letter from some local bigot, Hoss (that's right, Hoss) Mancy. So socially and civically tragic, but not the sort of mayhem you've come to see.

Follow the arrows and all at once you are outside, squinting in the Florida sunshine. Witness Early and Modern Junkyard. Bits of rotted wood (Civil War

wagon?). Rusted metal (The 1718 Spanish Jail?). Stacks of new lumber (??). Fiberglass lifesize replicas of barn animals (???). Alas, these creatures cannot inform. They stand silent, perhaps victims of some unspeakable tragedy.. No sign of the headstock neckbreaker of the skeletal remains.

Just behind the fiberglass cow is evidently the Bonnie and Clyde Getaway Care. A black '30s sedan riddled with bullet holes, protected from the environment by a huge glass box. (A less waterproof glass case contains the customary yellowed clipping of B&C -- some damaged beyond recognition. Worth noting -- the photo of Miss Bonnie Parker, nude & full of bullet holes on the morgue slab. Not your basic LIFE photo.) However, on closer inspection, the vehicle on display is in fact the getaway care used by Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in the MOVIE!! Outrageous.

You proceed to the last exhibit -- the one that appeared promising, that exquisite mix of Celebrity and Chaos -- the Jayne Mansfield Death Car. Naturally, anyone worth their cajones knows the tragic story of the Sex Goddess's demise. On a rain and booze soaked night, June 1967, Jayne Mansfield and Male Hunk Companion plowed their Buick under a truck, neatly decapitating Miss Mansfield's luxurious peroxide mane. Big titty blondes shouldn't drink and drive.

And there is the care under a garage awning, smashed up accordion style, glass gone, body rusted. Hot damn, this is the real McCoy! (Ref: police death photos, HOLLYWOOD BABYLON by Kenneth Anger). This is a genuine piece of tragedy. Stare at this mangled heap of metal long enough and you can smell the booze, feel the warm California air, hear the giggling and raucous laughter, and then, the squealing brakes, the screams, the smashing glass, and the silence. Another wreck on the highway, and America's 2nd favorite blonde loses her head. A tragedy of nation-wide importance, and here you can bear witness to the actual twisted remains.

We have come to the end of the tour, and what can be said about the Tragedy in US History Museum? It is no great Institute of Tragedy or History. This museum exists, swathed in dubious advertising and fuzzy interiors. The owner obviously procured a few "key" pieces of Memorabilia. I suspect that the "theme" of the museum was secondary to the acquisition of the various items. "Hey! We've got Jayne Mansfield's Death Car, a Spanish jail, Oswald's furniture, and everyone is walking past our house to get to the Fountain of Youth!!!" Nobody gets the "fine-print reality" until after they've paid.

I loved this place. I actually enjoyed the museum more for its "attempt". The idea of someone turning over their house to yellowed clippings of race riots, installing Oswald's ambulance in their living room, acquiring Jayne Mansfield's Death Car, notarizing everything, and THEN charging money... Brilliant! On the way out, I noticed two word, painted neatly below the museum sign. They read: NOTARY PUBLIC. Super Brilliant!!!

Directions: Drive to St. Augustine, Florida, and then follow the signs to the Fountain of Youth. It's right next door. Happy trails.

Strictly "American"

READ HARD OR DIE

BRIDGE DOWN by George Mair (Stein & Day, 1982)

If bridge disasters weren't so photogenic -- & this book reprints some classic shots -- this one would be a candidate for the trash heap. Using the smamiest tricks of modern journalism, Mair tries to scare you into thinking all bridges are but a rusty bolt or two away from....CATASTROPHE! Yeah, I wish too. Unfortunately, most of his "case" is nothing more than bad human interest stories about the Sunshine Skyway & Silver Bridge incidents.

FIRE & RAIN by Jerome Chandler (Texas Monthly, 1986)

After you stop retching about the title being a quote from a James Taylor song, you're in for some good reading. Subject disaster isn't especially interesting -- a Lockheed Tristar nailed by wind shear outside of Dallas, 138 dead -- but the treatment in thorough & fascinating. Includes everything from the inevitable human interest to the local undertakers squabbling over the bodies. Solid.

HOLOCAUST! by Paul Benzaquin (Berkeley, 1959)

No, no, not that one, but what you get by igniting highly inflammable decorations in a hopelessly overcrowded nightclub with virtually no exits. Hopefully, you recognize this as the Boston Coconut Grove fire (see "Classic American Disasters"). This is the definitive account, though slightly preoccupied with the suffering of the burn victims for my taste, & not enough of the legal wrangle. Nonetheless excellent.

THE TRIANGLE FIRE by Leon Stein (Carrol & Graf, 1985)

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire is, off course, a classic, and this book is the only full length account. There's enough stuff here about hysterical immigrant behavior to keep anyone happy. Only real shortcoming is that the author's an ILGWU heavyweight who gets overly strident at times. But, considering the lack of hazard pay the girls got, you can hardly blame him.

FRAGMENTS FROM THE FIRE by Chris Llewellyn (Penguin, '87)

Normally, I avoid poetry books like the plague, mainly because I can't tell Shelley from Guest. But I'll make

an exception in this case, a true oddity: a collection of poems about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire by a self-proclaimed "labor poet", and evidentially good ones. It won the Walt Whitman Award. Still sounds like "It takes a heap o'livin..."

DISASTER, DISASTER, DISASTER (Watts, 1961)

Most "disaster anthologies" stick to modern accounts. Not this one. Beisides the great title (part of the "Terriffic Triple Title Series", no less), publishers saved money & produced a superior product by reprinting old contemporary articles with a minimum of comment. Typical disasters, but a neat deal, especially for those too lazy to dig through the libraries themselves.

CATASTROPHE, CALAMITY, & CATACLYSM by James Cornell (Scholastic, 1975)

The best kiddie disaster book I've ever found (a surprisingly popular genre). Cornell covers about 2 dozen disasters, all quality stuff, whether well-known or obscure. A great way to start corrupting your junior relations early.

A BOOK OF DISASTER by Jane Ferguson (Hippo, 1981)

A decidedly inferior kiddie collection. Writing down for kids is fine, but using a tone like a god damn fairy tale is not. However, this book does have 2 redeeming features. There's a picture for each disaster, &, since Hippo is the Brit Scholastic, lots of the subjects are European, & hence obscure to us colonials. A good disaster is a good disaster no matter where it happens (unless it's China).

TRAIN WRECKS by Robert C. Reed (Bonanza, 1968)

Nothing like a good train wreck, & Reed gives you plenty, tracing the history of US wrecks from 1829 through the turn of the century. Interesting stuff, well handled, and incredibly & lavishly illustrated with photos & engravings ("more than 250"!). Mandatory solely on these grounds. But my favorite part is Reed's organizational scheme, devoting chapters to each kind of train mishap. Wouldn't you love to have a book with chapter titles like "Head On Collisions", "Bridge Disasters" and "Boiler Explosions"?

THE TOWN THAT DIED by Michael Bird (McGraw-Hill, 1967)

All this talk about American disasters is not intended to slight our northern neighbors; Canada has had its share, one of the foremost of which is the Halifax Explosion. During World War I, two ships collided in Halifax harbor. Unfortunately, one was heavily loaded

with explosives, caught fire & went boom. Want more details? Track down this book. It's a good one.

I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG by Robert Burns (Pyramid, 1952)
****true crime****
Writing may not be up to Lit Crit 101A standards, but that just makes the book more real. True story of a guy getting 7 years on the Georgia chain for stealing $5. Prison reformers take note -- this stuff makes homo gang rapes sound fun.

SHOUT IT FROM THE HOUSETOPS by Pat Robertson (Logos, '72)
****religion****
Creepo ex-Presidential candidate Robertson tells his spiritual rags-to-riches rise from Staten Island Swinger to CBN heavy. No ranting, just the inevitable onward & upward path thanks to frequent guest appearances by god. Jim & Tammy make a cameo.

CRIME WARPS by Georgette Bennett (Anchor, 1989)
****true crime****
I've read a lot of books about old crimes, a lot on current crimes, but this is the first on future crimes. Bennett is a pretty good criminologist & comes up with a pretty good (& thick -- 580 pgs) idea of whither the crime stats. Incidentally, it's bad news for the 'burbs & farms. Lots of heavy information & demographics, but not aimed at professional students. Nice thing to have when you argue with Republicans about the demise of the "good old days".

GEEK LOVE by Katherine Dunn (Knopf, 1989)
****novel**** reviewed by SduP
Even after seein several wittingly hip types toting it around, I couldn't resist the title. Ma & Pa Binewski, with the help of various drugs & chemicals, breed their own freak show. This is the story of their family: Arturo the Aqua Boy, who inspires a cult so perverse it makes the Scientologists look like Presbyterians; Electra & Iphigenia the Siamese Twins, Olympia, the albino hunchbacked dwarf;, and Fortunato, the telekinetic wonder. More than a little reminiscent of FRANKENSTEIN, overly literary only occasionally, and really a ripping good read. Definitely the product of a sick mind.

CALAMITIES, CATASTROPHES, & CHAOS by Peter Popoff (Faith Messenger, 1980)
One final disaster book to finish things off, & this book has the answer to the question: why do we have so many disasters? For those of you not up on literal interpretations of the Book of Revelations, it's because we are living out the Last Days. At least according to slimey faith-healing Popoff we are. Keep yourTV sets tuned in for the tribulations.

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